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Phenomenology-based Ethnography: introduction to the Special Issue

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There is a growing interest in ethnography in sociology and beyond. A wide range of new ethnographies has been published and is discussed, like Alice Goffman's (2014) „On the Run“, not only in academia but also in the media more widely. Moreover, businesses and business studies increasingly recognize the value that ethnographic observations can bring to the management of companies and the innovation and improvement of products and services (Cayla and Arnould 2013; Denny and Sunderland 2014; Ladner 2014). Coupled with the growth in ethnographic studies comes the broadening in scope of what is considered to be ethnography. For example, in the past ethnographers would spend lengthy periods of time in far away countries whilst recently sociologists have argued for “short-term ethnography” (Pink and Morgan 2013) and “focused ethnography” (Knoblauch 2005), forms of ethnography that often require from the ethnographer relatively short periods of time 'in the field', to explore the organization of events and activities.

At the same time, different kinds of approach to ethnography have been developed in different parts of the world influenced by rather different philosophical and sociological traditions. In Anglo-Saxon sociology there is a long-standing tradition in interactionist ethnography (Prus, 1995). This strand of ethnography influenced by

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George Herbert Mead and pragmatist philosophy has produced numerous ethnographic studies that have been influential also on ethnographies elsewhere in the world. This however has not stopped sociologists elsewhere to develop their own approaches to ethnography.

This Special Issue originated from a discussion with Gary Alan Fine about ethnographic approaches elsewhere in the world. Gary encouraged us to approach the editor of JCE about the possibility for an issue devoted to “*phenomenology-based ethnography*”, an approach that pervades ethnography in German-speaking sociology. The approach is grounded in Alfred Schutz’s (1967) analyses of the life-world. Schutz begins his analyses on the one hand with Edmund Husserl’s (1970 [orig. 1936]) argument for a return of the sciences to their life-world foundations, and on the other hand with Max Weber’s (1992 [orig. 1922]: 1) definition of sociology as a “science that seeks to interpret social action and thereby provides a causal explanation for its sequencing and effects”. Schutz uses these arguments to develop an “analysis of the life-world” (Schutz and Luckmann 1974).

The starting-point of life-world analysis is the perspective of the subject who lives and acts in and experiences the “life-world”. Its purpose is “a formal description of invariable basic structure of the constitution of meaning *in the subjective consciousness of actors*” (Eberle and Hitzler 2004: 67). In other words, the analysis aims to uncover the epistemological explanation of the life-world’s foundations by homing in on the experience of the subject. Despite this focus on the constitution of the subjective experience and meaning the analysis of the life-world pursues its

interests through empirical research whereby the researcher often begins with their own subjective experiences. These subjective and personal experiences remain the principal source of data. However, Schutz also highlights the importance of action for the production of these experiences, and therefore, suggests to include an examination of action and its origins in the actor, in the analyses of the life-world (Srubar 1988).

Here, Schutz's analysis draws on Weber's (1992 [orig. 1922]) call for sociology to aim to understand the subjective meaning that actions have for actors themselves. He argues that Husserl's transcendental phenomenology can help to reconstruct subjective meaning by seeing it as resulting from acts of consciousness. The meaning of actions is constituted in their design with respect to the meaning of the next action. Schutz therefore sees action as being based on "in-order-to" motives as their goal, and "because-" motives as the reason for their design. Whilst Weber's suggestion to examine the "subjectively intended meaning" leads merely to self-explanations that may vary depending on the specific biographical circumstances of their occurrence Schutz argues to use Husserl's phenomenology to understand the meaning of action for the actors themselves.

Phenomenology-based sociology derives directly from Schutz's analysis of Husserl and Weber's arguments. Over the past 30 years, this approach has led to a program of research that has given rise to a large number of ethnographic studies exploring areas like the life-world of DIY workers (Honer 1993), body builders (Honer 1985) the spatial orientation of visual impaired people (Saerberg, 2006), the olfactory perception of people (Raab 2001), the work of DJs in the techno-scene (Pfadenhauer

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2009), and many others. This Special Issue offers a theoretical article by Honer and Hitzler who introduce the origin and foundations of phenomenology-based ethnography and six empirical studies that explore the experience of life after a cerebral hemorrhage (Eberle), chewing accidents (Saerberg), the deployment of social robots in dementia care (Pfadenhauer and Grenz), the “life-world” of migrants participating in sport (Zifonun) and a video analysis of a Marian apparition (Knoblauch and Schnettler) as well as a methodological article explore the deployment of life-world analysis in mediated environments of video-games (Eisewicht and Kirschner).

We hope the articles in this Special Issue will raise the interest in the opportunities offered by phenomenology-based ethnography and lead to discussions about its relationship to other forms of ethnography, such as interactionist ethnography, autoethnography and others that are widely used by the readership of this journal. Our thanks go to Gary Alan Fine for his initial encouragement and to the editor of JCE, Charles Edgley, for his extraordinary support for us in putting this Special Issue together.

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